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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000191

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CLASSIFIED BY: June Carter Perry, Ambassador, EXEC , STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

1. (C) This message provides a basic chronology and substantive background on our bilateral and multilateral engagements during Lesotho's pre-election, electoral and post electoral developments. The latter more closely involved Southern African Development Community (SADC) Executive Secretary Salomao and his team. Our active engagement began with our 2006 request for funding to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) or the International Republican Institute (IRI) for training through the funding of 300 USG supported observers. Bilateral and multilateral talks with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) re-opened in early 2006 to demonstrate our commitment to support Lesotho's 2007 national elections much as we had done during the 2005 first post-independence municipal elections. All stakeholders, encompassing opposition and ruling party leaders, participated in one-on-one donor pre-election talks and group roundtables, as did Commonwealth, the SADC delegation, the SADC Parliamentary Forum, African Union, Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA) and NDI representatives.

2. (C) Following the elections, challenges by the new main opposition party, the All Basotho Convention (ABC), prompted further requests to donors for assistance in stabilizing the country. Chiefs of Mission (COMs) met with the SADC team to request mediation/facilitation of dialogue between the Government of Lesotho (GOL) and the joint opposition parties. Even so, despite promises to avoid potential trouble, the ABC called for a "stay-away" (strike) which resulted in the loss of millions of dollars to the economy and inflicted hardship on the neediest Basotho. The international community together, and the U.S. alone, requested a written communique from the SADC Council of Ministers on peace and security in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe. Statements were issued on March 22 and 23 attesting to SADC's willingness to facilitate. On Sunday, March 25, a political rally led by the opposition parties concluded with a speech by ABC leader, former Communications Minister Thabane, saying there would be no more strikes since SADC was mediating in Lesotho and

had the Zimbabwe issue to handle. We take Thabane at his word and hope it will stick this time. End Summary.

13. (C) Donors' plea for peace and stability culminated in the March 18 meeting with SADC Executive Secretary Salomao. After hearing the history of the opposition's request to diplomatic missions to break an alleged stalemate between the government and themselves, the international community (IC) thought it wise to take advantage of Salomao's presence as an honest broker. (We learned, although the opposition continued to say their leaders had not met with GOL counterparts or the Prime Minister, there had never been a request to do so.) The Executive Secretary's agreement to talk with all leaders was the final

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step in the IC's series of discussions urging dialogue, yet making clear interference in national politics was not the goal. Rather, an atmosphere where democracy and peace could reign was indeed all donors' concern.

14. (C) In terms of a timeline, the U.S. and the UN had met in September to coordinate support for the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). The Irish Embassy later pledged its support as well. We promoted capacity building through NDI training and its daily interaction with the working staff of the IEC. The UN and Irish provided vehicles and computer technology assistance. On the substantive side, we met monthly with the IEC Chair and Commissioners to reinforce the need for the "snap" 2007 national elections to be free, fair and peaceful. Although the IEC would have preferred more time to prepare, with donor assistance, the Commission was able to resolve technical problems and proceed with information campaigns. Simultaneously, the development partners received frequent requests from opposition parties to hear their grievances (pre-election) concerning the timing of elections, voter registration issues, and repetition of the 1998 crisis that had devolved into violence. At each session former military leader General Lekhanya (Basotho National Party) presented the entire history of the Lesotho nation while disgruntled opposition leader Thabane (a former ruling party member) expressed his unhappiness with the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD).

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15. (C) Donors' from all sides impressed upon these leaders, and those of smaller parties (from November through the elections in February) the necessity of taking their grievances to the appropriate bodies such as the IEC, Parliament and the courts. At one such roundtable to which all political parties were welcome, the GOL Deputy Prime Minister came with staff. However, he did not say much and the opposition did not raise all the question it could have. Thus, the unhappiness with the timing of elections (February instead of March, April or May) was seen as perfectly legal (as it was) by the LCD and as a loss of campaign time by the opposition parties.

16. (C) Before the February 17 polling date, a SADC delegation led by former Botswana President Masire, a SADC Parliamentary Forum observers team (funded by the U.S.), a Commonwealth delegation, the NDI observers and trainers plus the Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA) were all in place. Each had held stakeholder meetings with political parties, civil society representatives, diplomatic mission and NGOs. The election itself was declared free and fair by international observers. Nevertheless, political parties and donors heard comments from the Commonwealth team that the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system could be misused. (Note: It took New Zealand four election cycles to get it right, according to their Commonwealth delegation head -- a former assembly leader from Wellington. End Note.) The presence of then Minister of Foreign Affairs (Monyane Moleleki) at several polling stations in his constituency was a cause for concern, but the international observer teams did not consider his presence to have violated the entire national elections process.

17. (C) After promising the public and other stakeholders he

would peacefully accept the results, Thabane broke his word by raucous March 15 actions during Parliament and calling for a work "stay-away" to begin March 19. Despite the international community's plea, and SADC's, not to do a stay-away, he paralyzed the capital, Maseru. According to the DPM, the police (seen as partisans of the ABC), those who burned tires, threw oil in the streets and threatened retaliation to workers who tried to walk to their jobs, were removed by the army. He alleged the police would not follow his orders as Minister of Home Affairs. There were no complaints about these "removals," to our knowledge. There seemed to be a true desire on the part of street vendors to restaurateurs to carry on business as usual, but they felt threatened by Thabane's ABC, the BNP and the monarchist party faithful.

18. (C) SADC continued to meet with both LCD and opposition leaders during the strike and convinced the ABC to "suspend" its action. We and other diplomats met with Salomao and Tanzanian Foreign Minister Membe March 23. The SADC Ministerial Council did issue a statement on March 23 (see reftel) saying it would look into complaints further during its upcoming summit. For his part, Thabane said he would not hold further "stay-aways" as his concerns were under consideration by the regional body. (Note: In our bilateral talks with Salomao and GOL officials from the Prime Minister on down, the U.S. Ambassador and DCM also pressed hard on the Zimbabwe situation and the need for Basotho and regional leadership to address the Mugabe crackdowns. End Note.)

19. (C) Comment: Regarding Thabane's latest pledge, we assume as long as SADC keeps talking, he will keep still. We have also encouraged the GOL, via the Ambassador's private conversations with the Foreign and Finance Ministers, to open the door to dialogue with the opposition leaders, despite the lack of a formal request. Foreign Minister Tsekoa, a confidant of the PM's, has promised to follow through on this idea. Our guess is hardliners, like the DPM, will be reluctant to become forward leaning toward Thabane -- in their eyes a "deserter." End Comment.
PERRY